



Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Pre-appointment hearing: Commissioner for Public Appointments, HC 869

Monday 21 March 2016

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Members present: Mr Bernard Jenkin (Chair), Ronnie Cowan, Kelvin Hopkins, Mr David Jones,

Questions 1 - 52

Examination of Witnesses

Witness: **Rt Hon Peter Riddell CBE**, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: We have a particularly important evidence session now, which is the pre-appointment hearing for the appointment of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. Could I welcome the preferred candidate and would he like to identify himself for the record?

Peter Riddell: Yes. My name is Peter Riddell. I am the preferred candidate for the Public Appointments Commissioner.

Q2 Chair: What do you think are the main challenges facing the Commissioner for Public Appointments?

Peter Riddell: I think there are a number of challenges, mainly to do with establishing public confidence in the appointments process and it is an extremely important process. There are roughly 10,000 people holding public appointments. The public bodies are involved in vast areas of British life in various ways. Making sure that the public and Parliament are reassured is very important. I think this takes three parts. One part is that there is confidence in the open and appointment-on-merit process of selection. The second is that the actual process itself is seen as efficient and timely, where there have been complaints in the past. The third is that there is as wide as possible—and, indeed, wider than now—a range of people being considered and appointed. Those are the three broad objectives I see in the role.

Q3 Chair: The job specification is broad. It does require you to engage with the major stakeholders.

Peter Riddell: Absolutely.

Chair: Who are the major stakeholders?

Peter Riddell: There is a variety of them. In no particular order, obviously Ministers because Ministers make appointments and civil servants who advise them. It is also with the people who are on the panels who are making the appointments, although under Gerry Grimstone's recommendations there will be a different relationship there. It is with the public bodies themselves, in particular the chairs of them, which is crucial in order to get a wider range of candidates. It is also with a wide range of outside bodies to encourage people to come forward in various ways. In a broader sense it is the public—as I said, it is in no particular order—and particularly this House, because one of the important points is the relationship, as in a hearing like this because the key and major appointees come before appointment hearings. I think the Commissioner could have an enhanced role in relation to a variety of committees, particularly under the proposed changes. I see that as a range of stakeholders; underlying it are the public but all of them in differing ways in relation to the different objectives of the job.

Q4 Chair: How will you engage with those stakeholders?

Peter Riddell: It varies depending on which ones one is talking about. In relation to Ministers, civil servants and the chairs of bodies, it is by talking to them and being available to talk to them at relevant times. In relation to trying to get a wider selection and greater diversity in the broader sense of the term—perhaps we might talk about that later—it is also encouraging them to broaden their horizons on that. In terms of encouraging a wider range of people to apply, it is going around various groups using social media and just being available, in a sense, as a champion of the importance of public appointments. I see that as important. The other thing is, in relation to the parliamentary role, being available to yourself and other chairs of committees and members of committees when there is a pre-appointment hearing if they have anything to raise or myself, proactively, if I think there are elements of concern.

Q5 Chair: What relevant experience do you feel you bring to this particular role?

Peter Riddell: A variety of bits of experience. One is I am aware of how Parliament works over a long period, as a journalist, chairing the Hansard Society where we also did work on regulators and I did that for five years. In particular it is my experience, over the last nearly five years, as Director of the Institute for Government where we have dealt quite a lot with arm's length bodies—we are not doing any work on it now, which simplifies things certainly—and I have appreciated that. Also, crucially, it is appreciating the relationship between Ministers, civil servants and Parliament. I have had direct exposure to the nuances of the relationship and I think is very important to do that in the Commissioner's role. The other thing is as this predecessor Committee I did a triennial

review for the Cabinet Office on the Committee on Standards in Public Life. That was at the end of 2012. I am aware of regulatory issues. It is all those aspects and I think the key one is having experience of the rather complicated relationships between Ministers, civil servants and Parliament.

Q6 Chair: We will come back to the question of experience. Can I ask you about the Grimstone review that was published last week? What is your main reflection on the report's recommendations?

Peter Riddell: My main reflection is that the principles are the same as they have been since Nolan in 1995. I reread the Nolan report and the principles in Nolan and in Gerry Grimstone's report are remarkably similar. In fact, they are more extensive because there is much greater emphasis on diversity now than there would have been 20 years ago. Clearly there is a change in direction, which Gerry Grimstone is thinking about in his report, towards greater ministerial accountability for what has happened. Since 1995, with variations—and David Normington in his period of five years introduced an important simplification and clarification and did a lot of very good things in relation to public appointments—there is a shift away from the direct involvement of the Commissioner in the appointments process but more into regulation. So there is a difference there. In relation to the whole process itself, it is making Ministers more directly accountable and also very important shifts in transparency. I see that as the thrust of it.

Essentially what Gerry Grimstone has suggested is a framework, and that was in the Government's response 10 days ago, and it is quite clear that there is a lot of work still to be done in implementation. The Government's reply says that if I am appointed I would have a very full role in that. I have been assured of that by Matt Hancock and by others, and there is a long way to go. Also I think crucially this Committee should have a very big role in how this develops.

Q7 Chair: You have described to us what is in the Grimstone report and the shape of the Government's response to that. What do you think about the main thrust of this report?

Peter Riddell: My own view is that it is good to recognise that essentially it is Ministers who are accountable for making appointments. They are elected and held to account in this House and elsewhere, and I think that is desirable. What is crucial—and I have various ideas on how it should be developed—is that the onus passes to Ministers and Departments, who have to clearly raise their game in many respects on having the appointments panels. One thing I will be pressing for is that the Commissioner is consulted over what are described as significant appointments, which effectively have been the appointments in which David Normington and his assessors have been involved so far, those that are pre-appointment hearings and chairs of public bodies. That is roughly the same category. There are arguments about precise definitions but it is broadly the same.

I would argue, and I think there is an open debate on that, to be consulted on that so at an early stage I would express concern if I felt that what are described as the senior independent panel members, who are the replacements for the assessors, were not

sufficiently independent. There would be a problem in being too far back on that, otherwise we just get conflict, and for me to be able to say, right at the beginning, “I am not sure that this person is sufficiently independent” rather than get to a process where I have to say, “Hold on”.

I think a very important aspect of the process is the signing off by senior civil servants or the permanent secretaries. It is akin to the accounting officer role for the Public Accounts Committee. That is a very important change because it makes it much clearer where responsibility has to happen. That is very relevant to this House. I have seen the material you got on me, but in future for it to be clearly signed off that the process fulfilled all the principles that Gerry Grimstone lays down in his report for open fairness. For committees to be satisfied on that or if there are any problems that I have or the civil servant signing it off has, that should be relevant to a pre-appointment hearing.

The other factor that I think is an important change in transparency and addresses what has been a difficult issue is on time. One of the most frequent complaints—and I have that in the work that we have done at the Institute with public bodies—is that the appointments can take far too long and often they are too late. In a sense, I am an example of that, right up against a deadline. I think the suggested three-month period between advertising and appointment as a guide is absolutely right, but by making it transparent we can spot if there are delays. I would see my role as Commissioner, particularly on a big appointment, if there is a big delay to find out what is happening, what is the hold-up. There is a parallel there to something that happens already in this House whereby you can go on a website and see where a Bill is. You can monitor the progress of a Bill. In the Government’s reply is the nucleus of a similar idea that anyone can see what the progress of an appointment is. I think that is a very important and desirable thing. One of the real problems at present is people apply, busy people, and then they find it all goes into limbo, and it is identifying that.

Q8 Chair: In what way do you feel that Ministers are not fully accountable for the appointments that they make at the moment?

Peter Riddell: I think they are but by having the process of the panels, there is a step of, “We are presenting you with options”. There is a kind of protection of Ministers partly. It has been regarded for the last 20 years as desirable, that there is an assessor from a panel appointed by the Commissioner who chairs the panel for significant appointments, not members but significant appointments. In a sense, there is a slight cocoon round Ministers. They can override that if they want to. That is why it has to be worked on; what we have is a framework. It focuses the accountability more on Ministers. They are responsible. If they choose to make a mistake they should be accountable for it but equally, if the process is defective, I should be there to report to the House and to relevant Select Committees if there is something wrong.

Q9 Chair: Observing this from the perspective of this Committee, if there are public appointments made about which Ministers seem to be unsatisfied, two candidates arrive on their desk and they say, “But what has happened to so and so and why haven’t you interviewed so and so?” and the whole thing is thrown into disarray, how much is that just the lack of attention of Ministers at the outset of the appointment process?

Peter Riddell: It is slightly difficult for me to comment now on that, but one suggestion that is made in Gerry Grimstone's report is that Ministers should be free to put people up, suggest them, and there being a presumption for interview. It is not the same as automatic interview but presumption for interview. They are fully involved from the start. If they do not put people up it is their own fault because they are involved, they are consulted, and if they do not pay enough attention—one of the important points about this, it is a point David Normington has made in a number of his reports, is that Departments have to up their game on this. They are being pinned for being responsible for appointments. There is a developing and good central appointments unit in the Cabinet Office to co-ordinate and so on, but it is ultimately departmental responsibility. From what I gather, some of the bigger Departments involved in arm's length bodies have been responding.

Q10 Chair: So you broadly approve of the Grimstone report?

Peter Riddell: What I am saying is that this is what I am being presented with. I think it can be made to work. However, as David Normington has done, there are some concerns that I would seek to clarify and will clarify in the discussions on the order in council and the governance code and I hope this Committee would be fully involved in those discussions over the next few months.

Q11 Chair: You are saying there are no shortcomings in the appointments process that Ministers themselves could not address by paying attention to the process earlier?

Peter Riddell: Clearly there are, but this sharpens it up.

Q12 Chair: But in terms of accountability?

Peter Riddell: There is a kind of paradox with any system of regulation where the regulator is involved in the actual appointment. In a sense it is almost protection of Ministers. Under this it is much sharper to say, "It is your decision".

Q13 Chair: How are we meant to distinguish between what the Grimstone report describes as significant and less significant appointments?

Peter Riddell: I think this is an unfortunate choice of words, because I do not think there is any mystery in that at all. If you look at how the Government have responded to that, they are really saying the appointments where the Public Appointments Commissioner has been involved with the assessors in chairing already. At the margin there may be differences. It is essentially appointments that come to the House, the 60-plus and chairs of public bodies. Those are the ones they identify as significant. By less significant, my reading is what they were meaning was members as opposed to chairs and that is how the Government have interpreted it. The Government's response—which is a clarification that

they admit, is a starting point for later discussions with this and other committees—makes good sense. I think the significant thing is you are talking about the difference between chairs and members of bodies, apart from very—

Q14 Chair: That is a very significant area. Quite a lot of chairs of public bodies understand all too well what their boards require in terms of who comes on. What does Grimstone say about consulting the chairs of boards much more effectively than in the past?

Peter Riddell: He does say very explicitly that the chairs of boards should be consulted by Ministers much more on appointment and reappointment than has been true in the past, for exactly the reasons you identify. A good chair of a board should know what they need and the mix they need. I think this is a very important point because I have heard myself from chairs of public bodies that they have felt irritated sometimes that people had just been appointed without talking to them enough and that has been a problem. I think some of that is to do with the phase when there was a kind of bias against reappointment, something which your predecessor Committee under your chairmanship addressed a couple of years ago. The chairs of bodies should be fully involved in appointments of their members because they do know the skillsets. There is an important point here, which I would hope in my discussions with chairs of public bodies, that you can use the membership also to develop people, to look at future chairs, future senior members of public bodies. They could start off younger and come from much more diverse backgrounds and then develop experience on bodies. Rather than just saying you want an identikit 55 year-old, ideally you would start much younger than that with different backgrounds from different parts of the countries too, because geographic biases are quite significant in appointments.

Q15 Chair: Shouldn't boards themselves be responsible for making appointments to their own boards under the auspices of their chairman rather than this rather artificial process of everybody being appointed to a board from outside?

Peter Riddell: I think because they are public bodies Ministers should be involved, otherwise there is a danger of them being self-appointing. What I would agree with is strong consultation.

Q16 Chair: What do we mean by exceptional circumstances in which we might not pursue the full appointment process, have an expedited process? What do you think of that recommendation?

Peter Riddell: I think the key there is “exceptional”. What Grimstone identifies is when it is just purely for a very short period, a transitional appointment where a body has been reorganised and you need someone to chair it for a few months, or a de minimis thing, or there has been a recent one, a new body where it was absolutely clear who the chair should be. You were looking for a particular person and the person was available and that is very exceptional. Under the proposals, such things would be reported to the Commissioner and, if there was something wrong, I would report it to the House and the relevant committees.

Q17 Chair: In reaction to the Grimstone report, the present Commissioner, Sir David Normington, said that the Grimstone review’s “cumulative effect would be largely to remove the checks and balances recommended by Nolan 20 years ago”. How valid is this judgment?

Peter Riddell: I have talked to Sir David Normington, and he has also written about it and he gave me the courtesy of showing me his article before it appeared. I think he is signposting possible problems. What I sought to do in the last minutes is to say where I would be seeking clarification to address those issues. For example, the point I made earlier, crucially, about consultation on the makeup of the panels and particularly independent members for significant appointments. I would also be pressing for clarity on the audit function, which I think is very important and can be revamped and improved. Also there is a point that David Normington does not address, which is the tie-in with the House and pre-appointment hearings. He has raised concerns but it is also a different model being proposed. He has very successfully operated one model; a different model has been proposed. He has raised valid questions on the nature of it, on the appointment of panels—I have addressed that point—and the role of the Commissioner. I recognise those points and I will be pursuing those in the discussions on the order in council and the governance code and also on the override, the point you made on the exceptions. He is concerned that the Commissioner is being pushed out. I would see the Commissioner having a different role but still one crucially to reassure the public.

Q18 Chair: What I am hearing from you is that you broadly support this new model with caveats. Is that a fair assessment?

Peter Riddell: Yes, it is, or rather I have been asked to see whether I can make this model work. I think it can be made to work, there are advantages in it, but clearly we are not there yet.

Q19 Chair: I will be very blunt, partly because of a shortage of time but also because we are all grown-ups and we can speak to each other frankly. People are going to say that you are being put into this role to deliver a system that resolves some of the political frustrations that have long been expressed by particularly Conservatives that somehow we don’t get our people in. You are going to be the non-civil-service-steeped, non-impartial Commissioner for Public Appointments who is going to implement the Grimstone report that the Government themselves commissioned in order to dilute the controls that have existed over public appointments. What would you say to that?

Peter Riddell: I can recognise the point being made but I would not have accepted the nomination just to do that. I would see my role as to reassure the public. I do see very strongly a role of ensuring that it is not a matter of Ministers—after all Ministers do make decisions—just being able to get who they want, far from it. The criterion of merit is absolutely essential to it and that is why I would see a role in being involved in the selection panels, which is crucial to this, to ensure that these are not made up of people who can be described as too close to Ministers. I am aware of that point. Also, and this is very important, if I see something is going wrong I will not be silent on it. I think that is a

reassurance and in one respect it would be easier because there would not be assessors directly involved; I would be slightly removed and in an easier position. If I think something is wrong I will raise it with Ministers and, if necessary, with the House.

I recognise the point you are raising, Mr Chairman, but that is exactly why I see a transparency. Transparency is also difficult for Ministers. They have to be fully accountable but, while it is a challenge for me as Commissioner, it also gives me an opportunity to say if I think something is wrong.

Q20 Chair: Mr Riddell, you are a wordsmith, you are journalist.

Peter Riddell: Was.

Chair: You understand what words mean and when you say, “I wouldn’t be appointed just to do that”, what I hear in that is you are being appointed to do that.

Peter Riddell: The “just” means I am being appointed to operate a new system but I am certainly not being appointed to do a system that is merely there to fulfil what you said in your original question.

Q21 Chair: How can you strengthen our confidence that you are going to demonstrate the same kind of independence as your predecessors?

Peter Riddell: I have described how I would see the system operating. When panels are being set up, I would expect to be consulted. If I thought they were not independent I would signal that, I would say initially internally and then if I felt the process was being pushed through, if it came to a pre-appointment hearing I would notify the Select Committee on that and I would signal that publicly if necessary. I would fully do that. Also I would signal that through the various audit functions. I would absolutely not be afraid to resist what you have described. To go back to the “just” thing, what I meant was one is talking about a new system I would be operating, which is distinct from the David Normington system but it would rest absolutely centrally on public confidence. That is what I meant by that.

Q22 Chair: In your role as chair of the Institute for Government, can you give us an example of where you have published or promoted a view that the Government absolutely did not want to hear?

Peter Riddell: Yes, I can; a number in fact. I remember having a vigorous discussion with a former Cabinet Office Minister when we criticised their presentation of efficiency savings. He was furious with me. We said that they had multi-year accounted, in other words done additionality between years, and we said that this was not the right way to present it and he was displeased. We were very critical of, in fact in this case, the civil service over their permanent secretary objectives. That did not go down well because we were very critical. Most recently we have been pretty critical of single departmental plans, saying that they are basically political statements and they are not really fulfilling their

aims. I am giving those as immediate examples where we have been independent and willing to challenge under my period as Director of the Institute for Government.

Q23 Mr David Jones: Mr Riddell, why did you decide to apply for this appointment?

Peter Riddell: I decided to apply for two reasons. I was always intending to leave the Director of the Institute for Government some time this year, after doing four to five years. I wanted to move on from that. Secondly, I have had a kind of trajectory. The Chairman said the wordsmith as a journalist. It is five and a half, six years since I was a journalist and since then I have gone on a slight trajectory as Director of the Institute for Government; I have done a couple of public service things—I was on the detainee inquiry and I did the review of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, as I mentioned earlier—and I wanted to do a public service job. I also believe very strongly that public appointments matter and it is an important public role to provide assurance that this is being properly done and, above all, that the right candidates are coming through.

Q24 Mr David Jones: The person specification asks for an understanding of operating within a regulatory regime. What experience of regulation do you have?

Peter Riddell: Mainly a close observation. As I mentioned earlier, in my role in the Hansard Society I was on a commission we had on regulation before I became chair of the Hansard Society many years ago. We have done a lot of work with arm's length bodies at the Institute for Government, looking at their problems, many of the issues that are raised about the relationships between arm's length bodies and the central government. We have also looked at appointments. As I said, I did the review of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, which was a very important review three or four years ago. That is the experience I have had on that.

Q25 Mr David Jones: You mentioned your work with arm's length bodies. Could you describe the sort of work you have been doing with them? Is it purely advisory?

Peter Riddell: When I said we have looked at it, we have done studies, we have talked to arm's length bodies on a variety of issues. One of the most important is something that this Committee and the Liaison Committee looked at, which is the need to distinguish between various types of arm's length bodies. We produced a report some years ago, that the Cabinet Office has been doing some work on recently, which is a revised taxonomy of arm's length bodies. Obviously we talk to them a lot. That has been looking at the various different categories between regulators and advisory and executive bodies. As we know, there are all kinds of different categories of them. We have done work on that. We have done some work earlier on appointments, some years ago now. That is the type of work we have done.

Q26 Mr David Jones: Could you tell us what work on appointments that is?

Peter Riddell: It was looking at, particularly in relation to this House, whether there ought to be—and it paralleled the later report by the Liaison Committee—various categories of arm's length bodies that shared different procedures, whether you should have a constitutional group where there might well be joint appointment with the House, as there is with things like the Comptroller and Auditor General and so on. There are various groups where the House has a direct role. We did a report on whether there ought to be different categories of appointees. That was echoed in a report by the Liaison Committee a couple of years ago.

Q27 Mr David Jones: What would you say makes for a good regulator?

Peter Riddell: A good regulator is someone who is above all concerned about the public interest and recognises that the bodies being regulated work in the public sector in the broader sense of the term and that within the regulation is constantly alert to potential problems. The regulator does not run the organisation but is alert to problems quickly. If you look at most of the regulatory failures, it has happened too late. The regulator has either been late to appreciate the problem or, above all—and it goes back in a sense to the Chairman's issue—has been too slow to raise worries about it, if you look at what has happened in banking and a lot of other areas. I see that the essence of a good regulator is not to be heavy-handed and interfering with what the body does but to be alert in the public interest to potential problems, when they arise to see that they can be addressed and, if necessary, escalate and raise them more publicly.

Q28 Mr David Jones: Your personal experience of the appointments process for the public sector, as you have just described, is primarily academic and advisory. Would you say you have any first-hand experience at all of that?

Peter Riddell: It has been mainly advisory. Not in the direct way: have I been a regulator in my life? No, I haven't. For the last five years I have been a chief executive of an organisation with a budget of £4 million and so on, and I have been very much involved in that. But have I been a regulator? No.

Q29 Mr David Jones: Why would you say that your personal experience qualifies you more for the job than someone who, for example, does have first-hand experience of the appointments process?

Peter Riddell: It is not like being, say, an economic regulator where you would want someone who understood the markets. It is above all understanding how politicians, civil servants and the chairs of public bodies operate. It is that that is crucial and I do believe I have the relevant experience for that.

Q30 Mr David Jones: That experience would be derived from your role within the Institute for Government?

Peter Riddell: And also earlier when I worked here when I got to know Ministers and so on.

Q31 Chair: Can I pursue that briefly? What understanding would you say you have of how large organisations are led?

Peter Riddell: I would say it is mainly by talking to people who run large organisations, which certainly at the Institute I spend quite a lot of time doing. I have gained a lot from talking to chairs of organisations, which I do quite a lot. We do quite a lot, as I say, with arm's length bodies, hearing their problems and understanding those problems. I would not be required to run them but I would understand the issues they face because I have discussed it with them and I think I have gained a comprehension of that. Also I might say that in my various roles I have gained a quite considerable understanding of the relationships between chief executives and non-executive chairs. I am a chief executive now but I am also, as a school governor, a non-executive chair. I was non-executive chair of the Hansard Society. I have gained quite an understanding of what the proper and fruitful relationship is between a chair and a chief executive.

Q32 Chair: How would you distinguish between governance, compliance and leadership?

Peter Riddell: Governance is the structure and method of how an organisation is set up, in other words how a board works and so on. Compliance is do they follow the rules. Leadership is absolutely crucial; finding someone who inspires, offers clear direction and, above all, has good relationships not only internally but externally.

Q33 Chair: What experience could you demonstrate of being involved in the governance of an organisation?

Peter Riddell: My own experience as a non-executive chair of two organisations and as a chief executive for the best part of five years, with a pretty demanding board of trustees at the Institute for Government.

Q34 Ronnie Cowan: How engaged do you think the public are in the appointments process?

Peter Riddell: I don't think the public are very engaged at all. However, they are engaged in the results, because we are talking about massive public institutions of all kinds. They are certainly affected by what the results are and I think that is where the points on diversity come in. There is a danger, as you look at the boards of a lot of organisations, that they will see the members as pretty remote. That is why it is desirable to have a mix of people on them and I hope it will engage the public a bit more if they feel there are

more people they can relate to in certain organisations than they have had. They are not commercial companies, they are public bodies, and that is why a diversity and range of skills and backgrounds is a way of engaging the public in that way. That is why I would see an important part of my role as championing a wider range of people to be involved. There is roughly 10,000 running public bodies. That is quite a lot of people.

Q35 Ronnie Cowan: How do you do that? How do you expand it?

Peter Riddell: In a variety of ways. One is persuading the Ministers and chairs of organisations that they should look more widely. There is already a sense of public appointments in the Cabinet Office, which is the kind of centre of excellence within Government that is seeking to do this and is trying to expand. Social media allows big opportunities and I think everyone is far too timid about that, just to make known that jobs are coming up.

Q36 Ronnie Cowan: You have mentioned social media a few times. What do you mean? How would you use social media?

Peter Riddell: Facebook, Twitter, just say a job is coming up, and getting on to the right networks. It is not the hardest thing. I look at, on a very mini scale, what we do at the Institute for Government when we are seeking to get researchers. We use social media quite extensively to try to get a wider range of applicants. The danger is the head-hunter route and you have the standard list of people. You want to break out of that and it is now possible to do it. Of course, expense comes into that too. You can do it much more cheaply than you could conceivably have done it five years ago.

Q37 Ronnie Cowan: What are your ambitions for the role of the Public Appointments Commissioner?

Peter Riddell: One ambition is to provide public assurance that a new system that the Government have decided they want to construct can be made to work in ways that provide assurance that the people are being appointed on merit. There is a long way to go before that. We have just a framework at present; there has to be a long way to do that, to make sure that works and the system works fairly in a way that the public, media, Parliament and so on think is a reasonable way. The second objective is also a more efficient system, one that the participants, the 10,000 involved and the chairs of public bodies and so on, regard as a reasonable system, one that does not have delays to turn people off. At present, people are deterred from applying because they feel they get mucked around and they have to wait forever.

Q38 Ronnie Cowan: How do you measure the success?

Peter Riddell: On that one, as I mentioned earlier, if you have transparency on looking at how long it takes to make appointments, you can measure it very easily. I don't think that is a problem with that and also, if there are delays, with the Commissioner intervening and asking why. If there is a Department that has particular delays, going and investigating. The third one that is crucial is increasing diversity, in the broader sense of the term, not just gender but ethnicity, age, social class and geography, in appointments. Those are the three areas I would regard as objectives over a five-year period.

Q39 Chair: In a word, what is your strategy for improving the quality of public appointments, the quality of boards, the quality of people attracted to serve on public bodies?

Peter Riddell: My strategy would be to work with Ministers and the chairs of bodies. It goes back to your question on the chairs knowing what they want on the boards. It is very much a co-operative thing with Ministers and Departments. One is something that David Normington has talked about, which is them developing their own succession planning within their own boards for the range of talents they want to ensure there is flow. It is a supply and demand side thing and at the same time, in replying to the last question, encouraging a wider range of applicants to apply. It involves both sides working with Ministers and chairs of boards, and trying to encourage a wider range of applicants with different skillsets to apply. It is recognising also that it is not a kind of once and for all process, that people will go at one stage on to one board and a few years later, with greater experience, they might do something else.

Q40 Chair: I am glad you mentioned diversity because I was going to ask about that. We still have far too many men filling public roles. What particularly would you do to address that?

Peter Riddell: It is interesting, because there has been a lot of progress with increasing the number of women. The last report from David Normington had 45% woman appointees. That is partly because of the phase when there was a slight presumption against reappointment, which resulted in that happening. Again, it is both sides, the Ministers, chairs of boards for members of boards, and being willing to make more appointments not just of women but more from ethnic minorities, more disabled people, and accepting a wider social range as well, but also encouraging applications. One of the problems, it is quite clear from statistics, is that there is a disappointingly low level of applicants from people with disabilities and from various ethnic groups.

Q41 Chair: How do you think you can satisfy the hunger for Conservative Ministers to appoint more Conservatives when so few people who are members of the Conservative Party, and are prepared to profess that, actually apply for these roles?

Peter Riddell: I think the key point there is that being a member of the Conservative Party is neither a qualification nor a disqualification from appointment. Similarly, being a member of other parties is neither a qualification nor a disqualification. We have to get away from the point that the party itself is a disqualification from doing something. The

key point is: is the person qualified for the job? One of the things I would be very strong on is saying—and this is where the appointment panels come in—the fact that someone is a Conservative is not a disqualification but neither is it a qualification for it. They have to prove themselves on that.

Q42 Chair: So you do not see it as an objective to increase the number of Conservatives who are appointed?

Peter Riddell: Absolutely not. I see the objective as increasing the number of talented people. If some of them happen to be Conservatives, some happen to be Labour, some happen to be Scottish Nationalists, Lib Dems; that is fine. To identify we want more Conservatives to my mind is the wrong thing, but it is equally wrong just to criticise because there happen to be some Conservatives appointed. I would add a caveat to that, which I think is very important in relation to some roles. It is perfectly understandable—and there is a long practice in some bodies—that Ministers will want to appoint people who they feel will carry out their policies, and that is quite right. Whether they happen to be paid-up Conservatives or paid-up anything is secondary, but it is quite understandable in relation to some bodies—not all bodies—that they will want someone who they think will do what they want because it is a public body.

Q43 Kelvin Hopkins: I am still concerned about your relatively relaxed view of the comments of Sir David Normington on Grimstone. Your suggestion that you want to encourage diversity is fine, absolutely right and so on, but the concern the public would have and we would have is inappropriate people being appointed. I will quote Anna Turley MP, who is from my party, the shadow Minister for Civil Society, saying that, “The checks and balances set out by Lord Nolan should be strengthened rather than dismantled or diluted. To do otherwise would be to risk returning to the days when political cronies were handed jobs they didn’t deserve.” That is a concern. With this relaxation, isn’t that a worry?

Peter Riddell: Could I just correct one thing you said, Mr Hopkins? I don’t take a relaxed view at all. What I am saying is that there are different ways of fulfilling the Nolan criteria. I don’t take a relaxed view at all. I have discussed this with David Normington and I have read his remarks. What I am saying is that I believe some of those concerns can be addressed but not necessarily addressed in the same way as they are being addressed now. They can be addressed in different ways. This is why I corrected my misspeak earlier. I would not take the job on if it was to say, in the Chairman’s words, just appointing some more Conservatives. That is completely wrong. There is no point in having a Commissioner unless he can reassure the public that talented people are being appointed. Some of them may be Conservatives, some of them may be from whatever party, but on the cronyism point Sir David Normington himself has said that those charges, taken as a whole, are exaggerated. They are related to one or two concerns and perceptions, but those have to be addressed. If those perceptions are out there, you have to address them. I would certainly see, in the appointment of panels, in the process, in monitoring being very alert to that.

Q44 Kelvin Hopkins: The public has shown in recent years a level of mistrust in politicians and sometimes with good reason. The Chairman has mentioned the Conservative Party but if you go back to the days of Tony Blair, he was very concerned about regulators and watchdogs taking strong lines. He was very hostile, privately, to the Chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life who was a puritan and did a good job standing up for the public interest in doing that but did not please the Prime Minister. Subsequent to that we had Michael Scholar who did a great job as chair of UKSA, UK Statistics Authority. He challenged the Government when they were misusing statistics on crime for political purposes and they did not like that either. Indeed, the present Prime Minister—and I am sure previous Prime Ministers have felt the same—referred to, “We can’t have him, he’s a Rottweiler”. I think the public do want Rottweilers; they don’t want pussycats. Where would you put yourself in that spectrum between a pussycat and a Rottweiler?

Peter Riddell: In a sense, I can only prove that by doing the job. It is very difficult to say how I would do it. The Chairman asked me where had I shown independence in the past and I think I have on that. Equally, it wouldn’t be much good for me to take this job on and then face the charges you say. I would be appearing regularly in front of this Committee—and so I should because I think it is an important part of accountability—and if you felt in a year’s time I was not doing that it would be a failure on my part. I would not be afraid of standing up for the public interest to reassure people that it is appointment on merit and also to challenge. If I felt that the procedures were not conducive to producing people on merit, I would certainly be willing to speak out. One result of the proposed Grimstone review is to sharpen up some of the public accountability mechanisms, both with the signing off and I believe with the relationship with this House. I would see myself having a relationship with committees that if there was any doubt they would ask me what my view had been on the process and that is an example of where I think I could prove myself.

I am very reluctant to talk in Rottweiler terms, because I don’t think that is necessarily very productive, but I certainly would be willing to stand up for the public interests because these are important appointments, and if the public has doubts about them it is not very good for Ministers.

Q45 Chair: If we approve your appointment, we will be relying on you to alert us, not for us to drag you here if there is something we are unhappy about.

Peter Riddell: Sorry, I am making a slightly different point there, Mr Chairman. What I was saying was I very much will be alerting you but also I will be accountable to you every year. What I meant there is on a running basis to you and other Select Committees I would see my role as alerting you, but the distinction I was drawing is when I do my annual report, which is accountable to you, you will be appraising what I have done. That is the distinction I was drawing. I was not saying I would be dragged. I think there are two different things.

Q46 Mr David Jones: Do you believe that it is indeed the case that members of certain political parties either feel inhibited from applying for public appointments or

consciously or unconsciously are discriminated against when applying for such appointments?

Peter Riddell: There are certainly allegations to that effect.

Q47 Chair: Which effect, sorry?

Peter Riddell: Both of discouragement, taking Mr Jones's point. There is a sense I think in any period when one party is in power, people who are associated with an opposition party—and there are not many, of course, who belong to parties nowadays—sometimes feel they will not get a look in. I think exactly the same has happened in various bits of the political cycle. As I said, I think political involvement should not be a bar either way. It should not favour people and it should not bar people. I accept that is much easier said than done, because what the Chairman said is that in some roles there are tendencies to do that, but it is right that among some people there may well be a sense of, "There is no point in applying because we are not seen as being in the right camp".

Q48 Mr David Jones: To eliminate that, a regulator would have to take positive action.

Peter Riddell: There are two things. One is to ensure that if someone does have a political affiliation that is not a bar at all but that they are qualified. Some ex-Ministers have got things and they are perfectly well qualified to have them. I think it is wrong to criticise the appointment of an ex-Minister in some things because in many respects they are abundantly qualified to hold certain public appointments, but it has to be: are they qualified? On the other point, there are limits. The same would apply now. Ministers make appointments and the Public Appointments Commissioner does not make appointments but to argue strenuously that qualification is the key rather than political involvement.

Q49 Mr David Jones: What positive action should be taken to communicate to potential applicants for public positions that their political affiliation or sympathy is not something that would debar them from that role?

Peter Riddell: That is a multi-role with those involved in directly making the appointments encouraging the widest possible range of people to apply.

Q50 Mr David Jones: Would you in your role make sure that that was actually done?

Peter Riddell: I would make sure, more crucially, to try to persuade Ministers and those involved that they should not use a kind of political litmus test, with the caveat I mentioned earlier that with some appointments it is quite understandable that people will want to appoint people that they feel will be in line with their views.

Q51 Mr David Jones: To what extent would you supervise that process?

Peter Riddell: By close monitoring and auditing.

Q52 Mr David Jones: And complaining and intervening where necessary?

Peter Riddell: Absolutely. Among the powers, if the complaints are made, to intervene and to inquire and so on, absolutely.

Chair: Thank you very much for applying for this role and for coming before us. We will now deliberate in private.